Inequalities of Access – Global Social Structure

Research training seminar/ preparation of a grant proposal

Anja Weiß, June 12th 2025

Inequalities of Access – pivotal for the sociological study of global inequalities

Social positions do not depend only on resources, such as economic and cultural capital. In a transnational and global perspective, social positions are also structured by inequalities of access, that is, the greater opportunity on the part of some individuals to reach and connect with desired contexts. Inequalities of access are politically contested (e.g., boundaries, race relations, or graduated citizenship), but they also have a socially differentiated (e.g., skill-related) and geographical component. Combining research on inequalities of access with research on resource inequalities enables a nuanced and contextualized analysis of global inequalities, particularly for transnational and middle-class positions worldwide (Weiß 2017).

Life Course Analysis

Life-course analysis is well-suited for studying how persons and households access institutions across various geographic scales over time. Transnational comparison between life courses can reveal the impact of institutional structures and options for the sensemaking of biographical agents. One narrator may have experienced a specific trajectory whereas another narrator is not even aware of this possibility. To a large extent, (non-)awareness and the paths that people actually take are structured. Comparison between life courses, thus, shows the impact of resource inequalities and inequalities of access over time.

In a prior project comparing highly skilled migrants, my collaborators and I showed how status passages within life courses are multidimensional: transitions across borders combine with transitions between the educational system and the labor market as well as (gendered) transitions in private life (Nohl et al. 2014). Building on this project, the proposed research will expand the scope to non-migrants and a global sample.

Creating a global sample of narrated life courses

Oral history and social science archives have (historically) collected biographical testimonies. The project aims to create a citizen science initiative with a global scope, inviting people worldwide to contribute their testimony to a data repository. With the advent of LLM transcription and translation, a multilingual archive with a global scope has just recently become feasible.

Identifying global patterns with advanced qualitative and mixed methods

Qualitative research methods, namely the documentary[1] method (Bohnsack 2014), use participant observation and interviews to create typologies that map complex inequalities. So far, this kind of in-depth analysis could not address transnational inequalities because it could not deal with large numbers of cases and multilingual material. This is rapidly changing with the advent of LLMs and AI-based interview analysis (see e.g. https://dokumet.de/, https://qeludra.com/). The project will use LLMs to create cutting-edge approaches in qualitative analysis.

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[1] The name refers to Karl Mannheim's (1952) distinction between objective, subjective, and documentary meaning.

Analysis will start with the multiple patterns that have been identified in prior small-scale research. For an analysis of global social structure, these patterns ("types") must be connected to dimensions of structured experience, which are conceptualized as both distributional inequalities and inequalities of access. We will then use LLMs to search for these patterns or deviations from them throughout a continually expanding sample.

Once a type is theoretically understood and empirically grounded, its quantitative size can be estimated by using mixed-methods research and ethnosurvey-type combinations of qualitative data and quantitative sampling (Weiß/ Nohl 2012). Combining in-depth analysis with extended pattern finding will consecutively identify positions and understand their multi-dimensional complexity "bottom up". Combining findings on various positions will eventually result in a map of social positions worldwide.

Expected Results

The project will build a global life course data set that can serve as a resource for a community of scholars and artists as well as future historians.

We will be at the forefront in the rapidly changing field of qualitative research methods. Through the use of LLMs and mapping tools, we expand the scope of qualitative methods, focusing on the reconstruction of implicit meaning in relation to social structure (cf. Bourdieu's analysis of habitus).

We will deliver an empirically grounded and theoretically elaborate analysis of global social structure, with particular attention to transnational positions and those in the middle of the global income distribution.

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